

SMOKESTACKS & GERANIUMS ROGER SHOWLEY

Perking up the park

Planning for the centennial of the 1915-16 exposition puts Balboa Park's future in focus

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How much money is there and who spends it? Those are two fundamental questions facing Balboa Park as it gears up for the centennial celebration of the 1915-16 Panama-California Exposition.

Some 150 park activists – from museum directors to dog walkers – spent several hours on a gorgeous morning this month in the park's dimly lit Recital Hall tending to what Peter Harnik, one of the visiting experts, called San Diego's “collective backyard.”

At the macro level, or even the pedestrian level, he and other speakers agreed that the park, set aside in 1868, appears in fine shape, despite the 11 million visitors who trample its lawns, stream through the museum turnstiles and take in free organ concerts every Sunday afternoon.

Harnik, director of the Center for City Park Excellence at the Trust for Public Land in Washington, D.C., said Balboa Park is not like New York City's crime-infested Central Park was in the 1970s, St. Louis' pollution-plagued Forest Park in the 1980s or San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, where a homeless person's fire triggered a 17-alarm response from the fire department to what amounted to an urban forest fire.

But look closer and you'll see the rot.

Mike Kelly, president of the Committee of 100 that lobbies for preservation of the park's Spanish Colonial architecture, said the wooden railing across the Plaza de Panama seems so wobbly that it could fall down the next time someone leans against it.



SCOTT LINNETT / Union-Tribune
Photographed from a 12th-floor Park Laurel condo for sale, Balboa Park's California Tower is undergoing restoration – one of many improvement projects not on hold due to budgeting issues.

Mike Behan, retired park “czar,” said decades-old cast-iron water and sewer pipes surely need replacing. He also worries that a strong earthquake could topple park buildings and bridges not yet strengthened to current standards.

These and myriad other big and small projects fill a bottomless to-do list. Richard G. Little, director of the Keston Institute for Public Finance and Infrastructure Policy at the University of Southern California, said his team looked at a sample of 21 major and minor deferred-maintenance and capital improvement projects and came up with a rough cost of \$238 million for those items alone.

That's not the sort of list you can tackle by asking for donations at the Spreckels Organ Pavilion concerts.

The park has depended on private donations and volunteers its entire existence, from the time schoolchildren participated in an Arbor Day planting in 1904 to Kelly's group's \$50,000 effort to restore the Alcazar Garden tiles damaged from either water damage, skateboarders or both.

Mick Hager, executive director of the Natural History Museum, said the museums and San Diego Zoo collected \$200 million in recent years to expand, remodel or improve their collections and settings.

But much bigger bucks are needed in the years ahead if the park's master plan, written in 1989, is to be realized.

If it were up to me, the No. 1 priority would be to clear the cars from the Central Mesa parking lots in front of the San Diego Museum of Art, between the Spreckels Organ Pavilion and San Diego Aerospace Museum and at the entrance to the San Diego Zoo. What beautiful pedestrian spaces those could be – on the order of St. Mark's Square in Venice.

But a return to the look and use of the 1915 fairgrounds would require relocating parking to peripheral garages, costing hundreds of millions of dollars, or greatly expanding San Diego's trolley system, at a cost of billions.

Others will argue for reconstructing several of the still-missing 1915 expo buildings; rebuilding the 1930s Morley Field pool and adding new recreational facilities; upgrading Starlight Bowl; or beautifying Inspiration Point (a very uninspiring asphalt parking lot off Park Boulevard and Presidents Way).



SCOTT LINNETT / Union-Tribune
Vicki Granowitz is chairwoman of the Balboa Park Committee.

Some speakers at the Balboa Park Committee's workshop March 8 even volunteered to pay more taxes and – horrors – accept a public parking charge, if the money goes where it's promised.

That's where the “who will spend it” issue comes in.

Peter Ellsworth, who runs the Legler Benbough Foundation, initiated the look-see for the park after his directors complained that they were funding park projects all the time but the city was giving little thought to the park's needs in a comprehensive, transparent and credible way. The operative word used in the report, “The Soul of San Diego: Keeping Balboa Park Magnificent in its Second Century,” was “opaque.”



EARNIE GRAFTON / Union-Tribune
Problems, such as last fall's sinkhole on El Prado, crop up unexpectedly.

“Simply put, the city is unable to reliably connect needs and revenues on a multiyear basis to address the unfunded backlog of maintenance and repair and other capital improvements at Balboa Park,” the report said.

Ellsworth said his foundation and countless philanthropic institutions and individuals are holding back with their big bucks until they can be assured that their generosity will make a difference and not just get the city off the hook for its responsibility.

And so, for the next six months at meetings, the Balboa Park Committee will ponder “governance,” a subject, like city charter reform and general plan updates, that puts most of us to sleep.

Who are you going to call to wake us from the stupor? Amazingly or perhaps fittingly, the person in charge is Vicki Granowitz, chairwoman of the park committee and a former social worker who specialized in dealing with sexual abuse cases in troubled homes.

Like the families she has helped, the city's approach to Balboa Park is “dysfunctional,” she said.

“You have to pick it apart, break down the problem, create goals, figure out a plan or implementation and be incredibly specific, because the danger if you get it wrong was a disaster,” she said. She was talking about workout plans for dysfunctional families, but the same goes for Balboa Park governance.

Granowitz said in approaching the park's issues she doesn't want to come across as super-nanny.

“But there are some people I do want to give a timeout to,” she said.

I'll leave it to her and her committee to decide the best model. Call us when you've worked out the details.

What the public will really want to know is what it will cost them when the dust settles and the park is in better hands.

A general tax increase is always a possibility, and perhaps two-thirds of the voters would grant one if they trusted the powers-that-be to spend the money wisely.

But there are other alternatives that could come first. To pay for parking improvements, we could pay a parking fee in the choicest lots. To cover general maintenance and programming outside the zoo and museums, we could pay a 50-cent surcharge on all tickets to all events, one speaker at the workshop suggested.

Another revenue source, short of new taxes, could be several hotels on park property. If designed well and operated with the public's interest in mind, they could bring new night-time users into the park, offer new places to eat and drink and include meeting spaces for banquets and conferences related to the park.

Behan, the former park director, said park hotels would be a horrible idea unless they were sited in an out-of-the-way place. He suggested the south end of the Inspiration Point parking lot with its inspirational view of the bay. He also thought the 20th and B street city maintenance yard would be a good spot.

My favorite hotel site is far-fetched but worth considering: the high-profile corner of Park Boulevard and Upas Street, site today of Theodore Roosevelt Middle School.

Perhaps the San Diego Unified District would relinquish the 17.4-acre site, granted by the voters in 1920, if the city gave the district the 37.5-acre site occupied by San Diego High School, now on a 50-year lease expiring in 2024.

Roosevelt could move to the Education Center on Normal Street and the Ed Center could locate into a section of the proposed City Hall redevelopment blocks or to the County Administration Center property, where it was first proposed in the 1940s.

All very complicated. But out of all this shifting about could come better land uses and more tax revenue to support hundreds of millions in bond funds.

And if all goes well, only then could park lovers approach San Diego's richest citizens and persuade them to give big bucks to a park endowment.

After all, the Forest Park Forever group raised \$48 million for capital projects between 1986 and 1997 and currently \$3 million annually for maintenance, all from private sources in St. Louis (the nation's 56th largest city). New York's Central Park Conservancy has shaken loose \$350 million from donors since 1980.

Surely, the public-spirited philanthropists of San Diego, America's eighth largest city, could do just as well and help celebrate the 2015 centennial gloriously and confidently, knowing the future of its crown jewel will shine bright for another century.

■Smokestacks and Geraniums, a monthly look at local growth and development issues in San Diego, takes its name from a 1917 San Diego mayoral campaign pitting quick-fix forces against advocates of long-term planning.

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